

NAGASWARAM RAJARATNAM PILLAY

by E. KRISHNA IYER

IN art as in literature, that which makes a work noteworthy and enjoyable is, among other things, the presence of a distinct style of arresting quality, which is mostly inborn. Among the fast growing multitude of present day platform musicians, only a few can boast of having individual styles of their own. Of these few again, it is not all who combine a style with appreciable imagery and classical purity. If we were to search, with an open mind, for musicians who have a combination of these essential qualities of high art, we would be surprised to find no vocalists but only two instrumentalists of that type. They are no other than Karaikudi Sambasiva Iyer in *Veena* and Thiruvaduthurai Rajaratnam Pillay in *Nagaswaram*.

Traditionally used for the delectation of large masses of people in open air processions and big temple halls, the average sound of Nagaswaram is rather loud and sometimes ear-splitting. Thirumarugal Natesan, the famous maternal uncle of Rajaratnam, who was considered as the best of an earlier generation and one or two others like Chidambaram Vaidyanathan, were credited with having mellowed down, to an agreeable extent, the sound of their pipes. Rajaratnam has outdone even his renowned uncle in this respect; and the Nagaswaram tone of the illustrious nephew, as that of his compeer, Thiruvengadu Subramania Pillai, almost resembles that of the North Indian *shenoi*, in its softness and sweetness. The more remarkable thing about Rajaratnam is that he is able to control and sustain this exquisite quality of tone effortlessly, all through his performances, without the slightest lapse, even in his most elaborate displays.

On this warp of entrancing mellifluousness of sound, Rajaratnam weaves his web of unalloyed classical melodies, with sure mastery of

technique and transcending art, embroidering it with amazingly rich and varied imagery, and giving the whole and every bit of it the finish of a highly polished and refined style.

Like most pipers, he is at his best in his ragas. But he stands out from among the rest, in his clear, correct and aesthetically superior conception of raga forms and in unfolding them, stage by stage, with admirable sense of proportion, symmetry and balance, both in the choice of musical phrases and fancy designs and in grouping and embellishing them. His ragas are such clear, impressive and soulful pictures of melody, that once you hear them, you can neither forget them nor mistake one for another. This capacity of his enables him to render successively even seemingly allied ragas with a difference of only one swara, in their unmistakably distinct forms, without mixing them up. His *Todi* and *Bhavapriya*, *Nata Bhairavi* and *Shanmukhapriya*, are only a few among many ragas that bear ample testimony to it. The pallavis and the few kritis that he handles are saturated with *raga-bhava*.

There can be no two opinions about the uncommon richness and high artistry of his *kalpana* or extempore imaginative display of the most subtle type. Somehow, similar attempts, in many others, have come to be almost synonymous with unrelieved galloping speed, dry *birka* profusion or plenitude of *jantaivarisai sadaka* on the platform. Hence, much of what passes nowadays for high class *manodharma* art, happens to be too fast music, with mechanical finish and superficial trappings.

If Rajaratnam is an exception to the rule here again, it is because his art, both in its foundation and superstructure, is sound and substantial with its emphasis on un-failing melodic grace and is built

up with a judicious alternation of uncommonly kaliedoscopic and colourful designs of fancy in varying tempos on the one hand and soft pleasing decorations of all kinds, like thick and thin modulations of tone, glides, curves and quavers, on the other, each in its due place and proportion, without undue haste or overdoing of any element in dry hypertechnical gymnastics. Often, you can hear from him the whole gamut of a raga expounded leisurely with undulating curves and glides only all through. At times, he brings out the essence of a raga in one sweeping glide through relevant swaras and enthralls his listeners. It may be followed up by a vivacious cascade of fast rushing *vakra-sancharas* and *birka* profusion; and again right in the midst of them, by way of agreeable relief, he will sail off coolly with smooth sweeping glides or long restful *karvais* of enchanting melody. In fact, it is in his deft use of a rare kind of smooth glides and graces—particularly the *jar gamakas* (sweeping glides from one octave to another) and the mellifluous *karvais* (long straight tones), in between the most scintillating display of imaginative fireworks, that his genius comes out at its best and is inimitable. Such art produces wonderful and profound effects in contrasts, carrying the listeners off their feet in flights of fancy on the wings of colourful emotion.

About all, strange as it may seem, this exceptionally great and exquisite art of Rajaratnam does not depend upon any hybrid modernism or mechanical superficialities, for its appeal and popularity. It is innocent of any mixture of alien modes, Hindustani or otherwise. In its unalloyed classicism, it is a standing and shining proof, that Carnatic music, when expounded in all its classical purity has got its own special beauty, and abiding charm and appeal and can hold its own even in the midst of the present day glamour for mixed trends and mechanised art.

In short Rajaratnam's music is a rich feast not only to the intellect but also to the heart. If the true

test of really great art is its capacity to please both exacting *pandits* and uninitiated *pamaras*, then Rajaratnam's Nagaswaram music amply satisfies that test; and that he succeeds in it without sacrificing classical purity and traditional technique, must be an eye-opener for doubting Thomases.

As the most gifted exponent of such superb art, it is no wonder he is the acknowledged doyen or leader of the Nagaswaram domain, compelling the unqualified respect of his contemporaries in the profession. He is the most beloved idol of music-loving crowds. He creates a flutter wherever he goes; and if from a village piper you hear an unusual musical phrase or embellishment and ask wherefrom he got it, you will invariably be told, that it is an attempted catch of a bit of Rajaratnam's style!

But alas! Such supreme art does not come out in all his performances. Perhaps only two out of five concerts of his happen to come up to that expected level. Not that this feature is due to his art being freakish or fitful, or his being an erratic or untrained genius, but it appears to be the result of his getting out of proper mood through what is said to be an unfortunate habit of his.

Born in 1898 as the scion of a family of four successive generations of Nagaswaram experts, he had his inherited talents in music developed very early in life and quickly won his way to easy recognition and popularity all around. Still in the prime of life and endowed with an engaging and winsome personality, he is only too conscious of his towering superiority over others in the field. As such, he holds his head high without any undue sense of humility and rather likes to treat his average audiences with a certain air of indifference or condescension! But he is extremely affable to those who understand the real worth of his art and when surrounded by them he rarely fails to reach superb heights in his art. Though he and his art require no boosting, he appears to delight in glorifying titles being appended to his name.